

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE DONALD D. ENGEN, FEDERAL AVIATION
ADMINISTRATOR, BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE,
SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION, SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION,
CONCERNING THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM. OCTOBER 1, 1984.

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the state of the air traffic control (ATC) system and our continuing plans to improve the system. I take a strong personal interest in the operation of the ATC system. In addition to daily reports I receive on system performance, I continue to visit our field facilities where I have spoken with and listened to thousands of our working controllers. I have heard their concerns and taken their suggestions and comments back with me to Washington headquarters. In just the last month I have visited the Boston, New York, Kansas City, Los Angeles, and Fort Worth centers. Each month I also visit towers and Terminal Radar Approach Control facilities across the nation. My visits have confirmed the reports that I receive daily--the air traffic control system is operating safely. The system is still recovering, but it is healthy and ready to meet the challenge of increased traffic loads which have been brought about by our nation's economic recovery. Cooperation between the FAA and user groups is high, and, working together, we are continuing to improve upon the U.S. aviation system which is already the best in the world.

ATC Recovery

Overall, the air traffic control system recovery is progressing well. We still have a ways to go, but the progress we have made to date is impressive. Let me elaborate on that point. We are now handling, on average, 106% of the traffic nationwide that we handled in July 1981, which had the highest traffic count prior to the illegal controllers' strike. In terms of staffing, we are currently at 91% of our goal of 6,627 operational controllers in the terminals, and 83% of our goal of 5,085 operational controllers in the en route centers. We have 1,904 controllers in various stages of training in the developmental pipeline. We are well on our way toward meeting our goal of 14,306 employees in the controller workforce for 1984-85 to meet expected air traffic demands. We expect to reach this goal by next February, although some controllers will still be in the developmental training phase.

In order to meet our staffing requirements, factoring in projected training attrition rates, the FAA Academy will begin double shifts of classes, starting in December. I am continuing to monitor our staffing situation and, if I find that, due to increased traffic projections or other reasons, our controller workforce should be increased beyond what we currently believe is necessary, I will not hesitate to ask the Congress for more positions.

The need for overtime has continued to go down. When comparing overtime for the period of January to the end of July for the years since the strike, we find that there was a 29% decline from 1982 to 1983 and a 6% decline from 1983 to 1984. We expect further reductions in overtime as we reach our staffing goals.

Safety

Although there are periodic media reports of "safety problems" in the air traffic system, factual data shows that the safety of the system is continuing to improve. The fundamental purpose of the ATC system is to separate aircraft, and that system is performing well. In addition, the number of confirmed near mid-air collisions has gone steadily down, from 568 in 1980, a year before the strike, to 286 last year. In the first 8 months of 1984, 178 reports have been received. The vast majority of these incidents have involved at least one aircraft not under the control of the ATC system.

To promote high quality ATC services, we have instituted a quality assurance program. As part of that program, and consistent with Congressional concerns, we have implemented an automated operational error detection program, which can detect even the slightest infringement of our standards for aircraft separation. As a result of the improved error detection capability, the number of reported errors in a facility

typically goes up immediately upon implementation of the new software, but then goes steadily down as controllers become accustomed to the improved monitoring of their performance.

We have also adopted a classification scheme developed by one of our employee participation groups that refines our analysis of operational errors. Based on a sliding scale of horizontal and vertical separation, operational errors are now categorized as "Major," "Moderate," or "Minor," depending on the seriousness of the infringement of our separation standards. Significantly, of the 1188 operational errors detected in the en route centers through September 24th of this year, 88% were minor, 11% moderate, and less than 1% could be considered major.

Implementation of the new software and the improved analysis being applied to operational errors has led to a better understanding of the causes of errors and permitted us to concentrate our efforts on specific causes. Employee acceptance of this program has, frankly, not been good. Therefore, we have taken steps to place more emphasis on the positive approaches to improved performance and less emphasis on disciplinary action in relation to operational errors. Also, we are continuing to address employee perception of the program, which we regard as an important safety tool.

Delays

One of the concerns we share about air travel today is the problem of delays in the system. Delays for the first 8 months of 1984 were up 85% over those for the same period last year. This has generated a lot of publicity and, quite naturally, impatience among air travellers. I want to assure you that we are working diligently to try to alleviate this problem.

I should point out that one of the causes of delays is something which we would not want to change--the nationwide economic recovery which has stimulated an unprecedented demand for air travel. The airlines will seek ways to meet that demand. The FAA must work to provide the means for them to do that.

Other factors which impact on delay are limitations on the ground, such as runway, taxiway and gate capacity; computer capacity; traffic volume; air traffic staffing; and airline schedules. Bad weather this summer has caused an especially large number of delays. FAA can, to some extent, affect limitations on the ground through funding made available under the Airport Improvement Program (AIP). This Subcommittee has been a prime supporter of federal efforts to improve our nation's airports through the AIP. However, local and state governments play a major part in this effort, and this type of improvement takes a long time, not only because of funding and

construction time, but also because of the need to carefully assess noise and environmental impact. We, of course, have control over computer capacity, which is being addressed by the NAS Plan, as well as additional short term system adjustments, and air traffic controller staffing which I have already touched on.

I anticipate that, as we move into the winter flying season, the recent airline scheduling agreements and the fact that more controllers are becoming qualified will help reduce aircraft delays. We believe that the recent "demand scheduling" meetings held by FAA and the airlines under grant of CAB antitrust immunity have worked out satisfactory solutions to the problems at the six most critical airports. We hope the CAB will promptly approve the agreements the airlines reached.

At the carrier meetings, FAA pointed out to the carriers the critical time periods, in 15-minute intervals, when airport capacity was exceeded by scheduled demand. The cooperation we received from the carriers was outstanding. In order to alleviate the congestion at these times, they shifted hundreds of flights from peak time periods to less busy times. This will smooth out traffic demand to a significant extent and should significantly contribute towards alleviating delay problems at those airports.

General Aviation

I should point out that the excellent cooperation FAA has received from the airlines in trying to alleviate the delay problem has been matched by the general aviation community. We have met with a number of general aviation groups, and they have indicated a desire to do what they can to help the situation. We are confident that general aviation will do its fair share, and that, if given adequate information about areas of congestion, they will help resolve the problem. As an example, the National Business Aircraft Association has developed what it calls the "FASST" (Fly Around Saturated Sectors and Terminals) program to encourage its members to avoid congested facilities. To promote this type of cooperation, a meeting between FAA and general aviation user groups was held on September 28. At this meeting, information concerning peak hours at the six identified major airports and congested en route high altitude sectors was provided to the user organizations. These sectors will be published in appropriate charts and the Airman's Information Manual, and the general aviation community has indicated a desire to give this information widespread dissemination.

The other side of air traffic in our national system is VFR traffic, where much of the nation's flying is performed. I point this out because only a portion of air commerce flies within the system receiving services of air traffic

controllers. Where controlled and non-controlled aircraft interface below 18,000 feet and outside of terminal control areas, there are special problems. We cannot and should not infringe on the right of airmen to fly where they wish in the U.S. However, where these two types of traffic interface, we find the greatest incidence of reported near mid-air collisions. From a safety standpoint, we need to increase pilot and controller vigilance in these areas.

I would like to take this opportunity to assure you, Madam Chairman, that, while general aviation may be restricted along with other aviation users at particularly congested facilities, the FAA has no intention of excluding general aviation from any airport or airspace, on either a short term or long term basis, as a means of reducing delays. We believe that the answer to the delay problem requires the concerted effort of all segments of the aviation community, and that fairness dictates that one segment should not shoulder more than its fair share of the burden in trying to solve the problem. As I have already indicated, we have received excellent cooperation from all segments of the user community, and we believe this cooperative effort will prove successful in overcoming the recent delay problem. In fact, the government/industry Think Tank FAA convened in June to study the causes and cures of delays recommended closer FAA/Industry collaboration, and we believe this is a sound idea.

ATC Reorganization

Another initiative, which is in the process of being implemented, is the centralization of air traffic control operational authority under the Associate Administrator for Air Traffic. This centralization will improve the standardization of air traffic control operations and procedures and will give expanded responsibility to our Central Flow Control Facility in Washington. This will better enable us to make efficient use of available capacity throughout the ATC system, help reduce congestion and delays, and make the system more responsive to users.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that the air traffic control system is operating well, and continues to offer a high level of safety to the travelling public. I am encouraged by the progress we have made to date in recovering from the illegal controllers' strike of 1981, and I am confident that we will continue to improve upon our ability to serve the users of the system.

That concludes my statement, Madam Chairman. At this time, I would be pleased to respond to any questions the Subcommittee may have.